

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
Marine Corps University
User's Guide to Marine Corps Values

USMC COUNSELING PROGRAM

1. Introduction. This program was designed for you, the leader, to develop skills in communicating with your Marines. It also addresses existing requirements regulating the frequency and conduct of interpersonal communications. You as a leader are responsible for correcting and commending Marines who work under you. To perform this task effectively you will have to use communication skills.

2. Overview. There are two purposes for this lesson. First, it will educate leaders on how to conduct a counseling session in accordance with the Marine Corps order on counseling. Second, it provides a basis to instruct your subordinate leaders as part of developing your unit counseling program. We'll accomplish those goals by taking a look at the different types of counseling, the frequency that counseling should occur, the parts of a formal counseling session, and counseling techniques.

3. References

MCO P1610.12, Marine Corps Counseling Program
NAVMC 2795, User's Guide to Counseling

4. Discussion. Before 1984, the principle tool for counseling was the fitness report. The report can be a useful tool, but it focuses on past performance: successes and failures of duties already accomplished. How can you improve future performance of your Marines?

a. The Marine Corps counseling program.

(1) The Marine Corps counseling program consists of two parts. The first is performance evaluation, contained in the fitness report or pro/con marks, and is based upon the documented past performance of the Marine. The second part and what we are going to focus on today is PERFORMANCE COUNSELING which focuses on the Marine's future. These two program parts are considered to be separate but complementary.

(2) Performance counseling should be a two-way communication between the junior and senior that is positive and forward looking with the ultimate purpose of developing the individual Marine. The aim is to strengthen an individual's performance, and by so doing make our unit more capable of going places and achieving objectives.

b. The counseling process. The counseling process is broken down into three types of counseling sessions: initial, follow-on, and event related. Initial and follow-on sessions are considered FORMAL counseling. Event-related sessions are defined as INFORMAL counseling.

(1) Let's start off by discussing the first type of counseling-formal counseling. The characteristics of a formal counseling session are that it is planned:

(a) The senior evaluates how the Marine has been doing.

(b) The senior develops future targets.

(c) The Marine is informed of the upcoming session and its content.

(d) The senior prepares an agenda ahead of time.

(2) How much time should you set aside for a formal counseling session? 1 hour? 2 hours? 30 minutes? The answer is to make sure you don't shortchange the Marine. You must allot sufficient time to focus on the junior's overall performance and SPECIFIC expected accomplishments over the next several weeks or months.

(3) The initial counseling session is the first time that the two of you have formally sat down and discussed the future of the junior Marine. This session should lay the ground work for the continuing professional relationship. This is when the senior explains his/her goals and expectations for the unit, and how they relate to the junior. They should also jointly arrive at targets for the junior to meet before the next session.

(4) Any other formal session that occurs after that initial session is considered to be a FOLLOW-ON session. Here the individual's progress is monitored, any problems are worked on, and senior and junior plan future targets for the next period.

c. Frequency of counseling.

(1) An initial counseling session must occur according to the Marine Corps order within 30 days of the establishment of a new senior subordinate relationship. What do we mean by a new senior subordinate relationship? Does this mean that you have to conduct a formal initial counseling session with every Marine in your platoon within 30 days? NO.

(2) A platoon commander will normally only counsel his/her platoon sergeant, and squad leaders formally. He/she would then briefly speak to each of the corporals and below, but who will be counseling the corporals? That's right, the sergeants will, and who will be counseling the lance corporals and below? That's right, the corporals will. Thus, you must also be able to teach these techniques to your subordinate leaders.

(3) It is clear that lance corporals and below must receive a follow-on session every 30 days. These Marines have the most developing to do and need more frequent feedback. For corporals and above, once the initial counseling session is done, a follow-on counseling session must occur within 90 days. After that a follow-on session must be done at least every 6 months.

d. Five elements of a formal counseling session. Now let's look at the actual parts of a formal counseling session. These are the five elements.

- Preparation
- Opening
- Main Body
- Closing
- Follow-Up

(1) Let's look first at the PREPARATION phase. The preparation phase is where the seniors make their money. They should:

(a) Review the Marine's current performance in relation to the previous targets that were set.

(b) Give the junior advance notice of the time and content of the session.

(c) Select an appropriate location. Should you always use your office? That's convenient, but consider neutral ground, like a conference room where you are less apt to be interrupted.

(d) Make a plan, or AGENDA, in writing for the session. Use this as a guide to help you conduct the session.

(e) Decide what approach to take.

- Directive (senior does the talking)
- Non-directive (junior does the talking)
- Collaborative (both do the talking)

(2) Once the preparation phase is done you are actually ready to conduct the session. Which takes us to the next element of a formal session, the OPENING. The Marine will formally report to you and you should set him at ease by making some small talk, or maybe offering him some coffee.

(3) Now you are ready for the MAIN BODY of the counseling session. This is when you review the Marine's progress against previous targets, and develop a plan and targets for the next period. Unless you are using a complete directive approach, ensure that you INVOLVE THE MARINE IN THE PROCESS. If he feels that he has input into his own future, he will be that much more inclined to excel.

(4) CLOSING. At this point you must ensure the Marine understands the targets and is committed to them. If you don't summarize what conclusions have been reached, you risk having the Marine leave without being on your "sheet of music."

(5) FOLLOW-UP. Two things occur during this last element of a formal session: documentation and follow-up. Documentation is not mandatory, but highly recommended. You can use the forms located in the Marine Corps guide for counseling, which contains one example for lance corporals and below and one form for corporals and above. Follow-up is simply that. If Sgt White said that he was committed to showing up with a fresh haircut on Mondays to improve his military appearance, then next Monday you should be specifically looking for that.

e. The informal counseling session. Now let's discuss informal sessions. Judgment and common sense determine when informal counseling is required.

(1) This counseling normally happens when the junior or senior sees a need for it, i.e. it is usually event driven. The event can be positive or negative, and the session should be kept short and reinforce a specific aspect of performance. "Sgt White, last week you told me you were committed to making an improvement in your appearance. It's Monday morning, and you look like a seabag with lips. Find some way to get your melon scraped in the next 30 minutes." Also remember that it can and should MORE OFTEN be on the positive side. "Sgt White, you're looking sharp today, that's exactly what you needed to do to improve that military presence."

(2) Now that we've covered the two types of counseling which are what? (formal and informal), and the three types of counseling sessions, which are? (initial, follow-on, and event

related), let's talk about some counseling techniques. We will look at six techniques for effective counseling.

f. Counseling techniques.

(1) Setting targets. Let's look at the first: setting targets. Realistic and specific targets are set during formal sessions, and should be considered a motivational tool as well as a way to measure a Marine's progress.

(a) Targets must be measurable, realistic, challenging, and you MUST have them in order to effectively improve an individual's performance. They need to be SPECIFIC. Which is better? "Sgt White, you and I have determined that if you have a better military appearance it will add to your leadership abilities." or... "Sgt White, as part of our plan to improve your appearance, let's say that every Monday morning, you will have a fresh haircut, and a set of utilities straight from the cleaners. Do you think you can do that?"

(b) These targets should be limited in number to avoid over-burdening the Marine, and unless it is a directive session, they should be jointly set by the junior and senior. Only revise them if circumstances outside of the person's control change, not if the Marine cannot perform them.

(2) Problem solving. The next counseling technique is problem solving. This technique is used when something has occurred that is hindering the Marine's performance. The questions on the slide are from the counseling handbook, and although they look wordy, if you ask each of them according to the situation, they can help sort out the problem.

(a) Perhaps when you ask "If there is something about the junior that is preventing performance?", you might find out that he does not have the required mental or physical ability. When you ask the question, "Is there something outside his control that is hindering him?", you will find out that he does not know that his performance is not meeting expectations. Does he have the necessary knowledge? Or is he missing certain necessary skills? Perhaps the Marine has an attitude that prevents him from progressing.

(b) Whatever the problem turns out to be, we must always be willing to consider that it might be something outside the junior's control. More often than not, it is something that we have not done correctly. Confusion caused by poor targets, lack of feedback on his performance, and lack of positive reinforcement are common problems. Others can be conflicting

demands on the junior's time, insufficient resources, and lack of delegated authority to achieve desired results.

(c) Once the problem is identified, we need to start looking at solutions. You must look at these factors and decide if the solution you have picked is the best one. Above all, it should be realistic and as simple as possible.

(3) Questioning. The next counseling technique is questioning. Questioning is valuable as a tool to bring problems, viewpoints, and attitudes to the surface, and to stimulate thinking. There are four types of questioning which are closely related to the type of counseling approach you decide to use.

(a) The closed ended question. Commonly used when you want a yes or no answer. What counseling approach would best be supported by this type of counseling? Yes, the direct approach.

(b) The open ended question. This prompts the individual to give an explanation and forces them to open up more in order to share their thoughts. What counseling approach would be best served by this kind of question? That's right, the non-directive approach.

(c) The probing question. This kind of question is meant to take the conversation further and force the junior to think. "What now, lieutenant" is a common one asked at TBS.

(d) The interpretive question. This question is one where you draw a conclusion and solicit the other's agreement or disagreement. This is a good way to wrap up a series of questions and to draw conclusions.

(4) Active listening. The next counseling technique is active listening. When you manage to get your Marines to open up to you, you must be able to listen to what they are saying and interpret it. There are two barriers that can prevent you from doing this; lack of concentration, and filters.

(a) Lack of concentration is simply that. We listen four times faster than we speak, and often we use that extra time to think about something else, like what we're going to say next. It is essential that you give 100% of your attention to the Marine. All the more important that you have scheduled the session in a place and time where you will not be interrupted.

(b) Filters occur when, because of a bias, we refuse to listen to a person. A Marine ignores directions because he

does not like the appearance of the person giving directions. What would be some other examples of filters? If you think someone is unintelligent, out of shape, speaks differently or is from a different background.

(c) Some techniques for effective listening:

[1] Listen for generalizations or threads of meaning that can be deduced from the facts.

[2] Listen for facts (Pvt Jones was 30 minutes late) and distinguish them from opinions (Pvt Jones doesn't care about doing a good job).

[3] Listen for changes in tone of voice, rate of speech, and volume. This may indicate that the junior is unsure about something or may not want to come forth with some information. Watch for non-verbal cues (avoiding eye contact, slumping, clenched fists). Remember, active listening is not only hearing what is said, but it is also interpreting the meaning of what is said.

(5) Feedback. The next counseling technique is giving feedback. Feedback is basically letting someone know how they are doing. Unless it is a directive session, you should use more positive than negative reinforcement. Focus on specific actions and events and not personal issues. Relate the feedback to the set targets and the unit's targets. If the person is silent, use probing questions to get responses. Allow the junior to vent emotions, but avoid arguments. Feedback is most effective if:

(a) It deals with things that can be changed.

(b) It is timely (If Sgt White doesn't have his hair cut on Monday, it is ineffective feedback if you don't speak to him until Wednesday).

(c) It should be geared toward the individual's needs, not yours. Simply venting your anger accomplishes nothing. You are not prepared to hear the junior's responses.

(6) Planning for improvement. The last counseling technique is planning for improvement. The important things to remember here is that the plan is JOINTLY developed, and should have specific steps and a timetable. The plan then becomes part of the on-going counseling process to track progress and problems.

5. Summary. Counseling your Marines. Setting aside specific periods of time to discuss their future, and teaching your NCO's

how to counsel their Marines is one of the best tools that a leader can use to develop trust and understanding in the unit. In order to do that, you must understand the material that we've covered today--the different types of counseling, the frequency with which counseling should occur, the parts of a formal counseling session, and counseling techniques. YOU are the one who will either do it or ignore it. If there is one reason that many of us do not do it well, it is because we do not practice it, and we think we are so busy that we do not schedule the time for it.